

BLOSSOMING HOPE



A SILVER
LINING SERIES
BOOK - 1



LANE ANDERSON

Blossoming Hope
A Silver Lining Series
Book 1
Lane Anderson



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A Special Gift For You!

I wanted to give you a special gift just for joining me in this adventure to the past. Having you by my side is an essential component in this journey of conquering all my dreams as an author. I don't take you for granted, and I greatly appreciate your presence! So to say thank you, I am gifting you a Free Copy of **"Bound to be my Sweetheart!"** Get your free copy by clicking the image below or [clicking here!](#)



Kind Regards,
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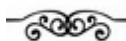
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Columbus, Ohio
1918



A gigantic, frightening figure kept coming closer to Hope in the dark hallway. She became increasingly terrified and ran as fast as she could in the opposite direction, but it seemed as though every step she took farther away from it brought her even closer than before. When she saw the figure approach, her immediate response was to stand still and confront it like she would in any challenging situation. Father always taught her that the best way to overcome one's fear was to face it, and she lived by that. But this time, this thing, this person, was different from what she anticipated a fearful situation would be. Something was different about this, something unusual. It seemed to be an oxymoron; it was hostile but friendly. It was fiery, but with a kind of heat, she found herself wanting to explore. Hope saw herself moving towards this being, an invisible magnetic force pulling her amid her continuous struggle and resistance. Her fears increased as she saw that the darkness in the hallway grew thicker, but she determined to keep up her stance.

With every ounce of strength, she yelled,

"I am not afraid of you! How about you show your face? Coward!"

Then she heard a voice, one she was not expecting. It was a husky masculine voice that in no way matched the being she was supposedly fixated upon.

Unexpectedly the being began to speak, "Hope. It's me."

"Me' is not a name. What is your name? Who are you? What do you want?" she immediately retorted.

At this point, she was intensely terrified and visibly shaken; every ounce of courage she had previously gathered dissipated. She was breathing faster, the hallway grew more expansive and darker, the being's voice came closer and closer. She could hear it resounding in her eardrums; he was calling her name. His whole frame was engulfing her when she heard someone call her name again.

"Hope. Hope."

At this point, Hope lost her grip and was about to fall when suddenly she jumped up and out of sleep; but she kept hearing it and gasped, then settled again, her environment slowly coming into her consciousness. She suddenly remembered where she was; she heard someone calling once again.

"Hope. Hope." It was Joanne.

"Thank God it was only a dream," she muttered under her breath.

Joanne called out again, "Hope, wake up, child. Alice has been crying."

Then on the realization that she probably had overslept, she whispered, "Oh my God, Alice, Morgan, school, hospital."

Hope frantically rubbed her eyes with the back of her palms as she hurriedly shifted the bed covers and scrambled out of bed. She quickly jumped out of the room and aimed for the room adjacent to hers. Joanne was carrying a squealing Alice in her arms and pacing back and forth in the room.

"Ssh, come on, baby, stay quiet for Mrs. J, will you? Your food will be here soon," Joanne told Alice while patting her back in a bid to comfort her.

An impatient Alice, amid sobs, responded "Me food" and settled for more quiet sobs on sighting Hope.

Hope suggested that she stay in a room close to Alice if she had an immediate need in the middle of the night; she would not need to run all the way across the house. It was quite large. Apparently, she failed on the very first test run. She quickly walked towards Joanne, who now stood in one spot. Hope silently prayed to God that Mrs. Burnett did not hear Alice. From their previous encounter, she was pretty sure she was not a fan of hers.

"Oh, Mrs. Wellington, I am so sorry. I did not hear her cry; I would have come sooner."

"It's fine, and once again, it's Joanne."

"Okay, Joanne, it is. Sorry. Thank you for tending to her."

"That is not a problem; she is my sweet little baby too," Joanne said while passing Alice to Hope. "I noticed she soiled her clothing over the night, so I asked Janet for a replacement before she is bathed and fed. Miriam should be here soon to show you all you need to take care of the children."

"Yes, yes, Miriam told me about that. I will change her clothing right away; thank you again."

"You are welcome. You look worried though, rough night?"

"Uh...uh...I don't know...it's just..."

Hope loved the woman already, but opening up to people did not come easily for her. She processed things internally, especially when it had to do with deep-seated emotions. She was not about to tell Joanne she resented Eric for the position he put her in last night. 'I have a proposition for you,' he said with that mischievous smirk. Hope stayed awake throughout the night, thinking about the meeting and her response to Eric's proposition. She wondered if he believed her foolish for choosing the option she did. Then the nightmare, the voice sounded vaguely familiar now that she thought about it, but she just

could not place it yet. As a result of last night's events, she overslept. Leaving Alice crying, unattended, was not exactly how she imagined her first day would go. The thoughts came rushing in from various places; she almost forgot she was in the middle of a conversation with Joanne. Joanne's voice and a pat on Hope's shoulder instantly pulled her out of her thoughts.

"It's fine, child. It really is."

"Uhh...what?"

"It's fine if you do not want to talk about it."

At this point, Hope felt really awful and did not want the old woman's effort to go to waste, so she spoke instead. "I feel like I have already failed my first test run. I mean, she was just next to me, and I did not even hear her cry. Do you think Mrs. Burnett will ask her son to dismiss me?"

With a snort, Joanne replied. "To hell with what Dianne thinks. Eric is the boss around here; he only gets to decide what your fate is. Relax, you will be fine."

Bizarrely, that was comforting, but it did not change the fact that she resented the man. Alice was already fast asleep again, so thankfully, there was no need to be alarmed.

"Don't worry; let us just go make sure Morgan gets ready for school, shall we?"

"Okay."

Just as they both stepped out of the room and into the dimly lit hallway, they heard rapid and resounding footsteps approaching them and a shrill voice coming from the opposite direction of the hallway.

"Did I hear a baby crying?" It was Dianne, Eric's mother; she continued screaming, "Where in God's name is the nanny? Hope or something other?"

Hope shot Joanne a worried look as she came to face Dianne and responded,

"Yes, ma'am, I'm here. Good morning ma'am."

"Why did I hear my grandchild crying? What did you do to her?"

"Do to her? What... she..."

At this point, Joanne felt the needed to jump in and rescue Hope from the lion's grasp. She stepped up, smiled, and addressed Dianne, "Alice probably had a bad dream and woke up startled, but thankfully Hope got to her in time. She just needs to be bathed and fed, and that is where we are off to. You would not want our sweet Alice to spend another minute in her mess, would you? Go on, child."

Joanne gently shoved Hope towards the direction of the bath; she almost collided with Mrs. Burnett.

"Sorry ma'am, excuse me, ma'am. I'll just"

Hope met Mrs. Burnett's dark stare, and the sentence died a natural

death. As soon as she walked past her repelling expression, she turned towards Joanne and mouthed, 'thank you.'

Joanne, standing opposite Dianne, said,

"Oh, good morning Dianne, I trust you had a lovely night. Or didn't you?"

Dianne stood still, hands akimbo, and redirected her gaze to the woman in front of her. She always hated Joanne but silently swore she would never engage in any battle of words with the woman. Joanne knew too much to be easily intimidated. Instead of a response, she hissed and turned away.

"I thought so."

The rest of the morning went by quickly. Hope was thankful she escaped Mrs. Burnett's trap, but how many more were to come? She thought.

The drive to the hospital was awkward, to say the least. Charles had gone out with the Burnett's official vehicle to drop off Morgan and Alice at school. Hope needed to visit her mother; she was dying to see her and could not wait until Charles returned to take her there. She could have gone with the kids earlier, but she was swamped with duties, so she decided to walk. Not the best choice considering the distance from the Burnett home to the Grant Medical Center, but that was the only option she had left. No matter how discomforting it was, she was going to take it. She informed everyone she needed to, carried a food basket for her mother, and immediately started walking towards the gate. Hope had not gotten too far from the house when she heard the sound of a vehicle coming from behind; she stopped and turned towards it.

It was Eric.

A black Ford Model T came to a stop beside her, and he asked her to get in. From his tone, she knew it was not a request. So she obliged.

What did she think she was doing? Walking all the way to Grant Medical Center alone? Hope's subtle stubbornness was such a delight to watch, and Eric never passed up an opportunity to be part of the show. It was his first time seeing her since their impromptu meeting yesterday evening. He could tell she was distressed by it, but he had not fully envisioned her response until she gave it. Truth be told, the meeting was more of an excuse to ogle at her stunning beauty again, but he would not admit that to any living soul, not Eric Burnett. He thought of her most of the night, mostly in curiosity, nothing more. What lay beneath her surface? What stories did those blue eyes hold? Subconsciously, his mind reverted to the first time he saw Elaine in that shiny blue dress at her brother's wedding. Eric wondered why the memory of his late wife had to come at that moment; it felt more like

a rebuke than a pleasant memory. As soon as Hope climbed into the car and settled, Eric tried to start a conversation, which was actually more of a lecture.

"Walking to the hospital is not a very smart thing to do; I believe you should know better."

Eric was now her boss, and Hope had to accept it whether she liked it or not. The reality pierced her deeply.

Silently, with a high level of restraint, she responded,

"Yes. Apologies, Sir."

"You should not be apologizing to me. It is your legs, not mine."

"Yes, Eric. Exactly why you should have left me alone!" she thought silently.

Her mind was focused on seeing her mother; she barely had the strength to keep up with his usual smug attitude. She faced him with a plastered half-baked smile and said, "Sorry, Sir." Then kept her gaze out the window throughout the ride.

Sighting the hospital was a massive relief to Hope because as soon as Eric's foot hit the brakes, she said 'thank you,' got out of the car, and hurriedly started for the hospital building. Eric watched her run and immediately regretted his outburst earlier. He was not sure why but something condemned him inside. Almost immediately, he changed his mind and instead redirected his focus to his tasks at work. It was going to be a long day ahead, and he made sure to be seated before clients started trooping in. He turned the car around and zoomed off. It would be a long day indeed for Eric, but what was about to stretch the day was not one he envisioned, not in his lifetime.

"What do you mean, Hope? No, what does he mean? If you had told me earlier, I would not have agreed to come with you to this place."

Rosemary was trying so hard to find a balance between the conflicting emotions she was experiencing. Gratitude, anger, remorse, sadness all surged from within her, each fighting to be expressed.

'What did her darling daughter just tell her? Better still, what did she just do to herself?' Rosemary thought to herself.

"I know, Mother, but you needed to be here. You needed this. I would not in my good conscience stay another day to watch you live in pain. Not when I had a way to make you better. Isn't this what we have been praying for all along?"

"Maybe, but not in this way. It is just...." The remaining words were lost amid sobs as the aching sadness took first place, washing over Rosemary. She clutched the hospital bed with her fists as she barely had enough strength for any strenuous activity.

"Oh, Mother, please don't...." Hope edged closer and enclosed her

mother's petite frame in an embrace. What had once been so healthy and robust now looked so frail, and that broke her heart even more. She looked around, praying her mother's cry did not draw attention in their direction.

Hope purposely did not disclose the details of her deal with Eric, but her mother kept singing the praises of this 'God sent' savior so much it was beginning to get under her skin. Without thinking it through, she presented the real Eric to her mother, divulging all the details of their meeting the previous day. Eric's proposition was the best deal, the only shot she had at getting her mother the medical care she desperately needed. She was not going to allow her fickle emotions to get in the way of that. She did not care if she had to pay him off for the rest of her life; she would do anything for her mother. Hope could still not comprehend why Eric was the way he was or did the things he did. Granted, he was kind of mysterious, but if mystery could help her mother get well, she would readily offer herself her livelihood even as a sacrifice. Her mother deserved it and more.

Rosemary managed to continue, with a croaked voice, "It is your life we are talking about here; what about the plans for your schooling? The soup kitchen?"

Hope let out a sigh and smiled lazily. She was trying to convince herself that the following words coming out of her mouth were true. However false the reality was, she so badly wanted to hold on to it; it was all she had at the moment.

"We will get by, Mother, we will."

Chapter Two



Joanne could hear the voices over her head arguing loudly -a raucous male voice and shrill female voice. It seemed to be coming from the master's chamber; with the way it was going, she felt like she was a part of it without even trying to. It was one of the rare occasions Eric cared to battle it out with Dianne. He only did that when it involved something he was deeply passionate about. All she could do was silently pray that whatever fires there were would be put out before it stirred the children awake. This time it was Dianne trying to make a point.

"You have not been yourself for days because of a job you do not even need. You have all the money you need to last you a lifetime, for God's sake!"

"Mother, I am not in it for the money. I have already stated that...."

"That what, son? You haven't cared to spend any quality time with your children in days!"

Dianne had a fair point there, Eric mostly stayed locked away in his room since the incident at the office, and when he did step out, it was only to solve the mystery that got him suspended from work.

"They are now without a mother. They need you! What would Elaine say seeing you like...."

"That is enough, Mother! I said enough!" The voice resounded so loud, the walls were probably thinking of giving way soon.

Everyone in the house knew that matters pertaining to Elaine were somewhat forbidden subjects to be discussed with Eric unless he started the conversation. Still, apparently, not even he could shush Dianne when she had not exhausted what she had in mind to say. The back and forth continued, and as soon as she heard footsteps coming in her direction, Joanne turned to see Hope approaching her from the right-wing of the house where the children's rooms were.

Hope cast her a questioning glance. "Joanne, what is going on? I just heard the noise."

"Oh dear, I hope it did not wake the children."

"No, not yet, but I am afraid it may sometime soon. I just put Alice to bed a few minutes ago."

Hope stood still and listened to the voices. "Is that Eric and Mrs. Burnett I hear?"

"I wish I could say otherwise, child."

"What could possibly be the issue?"

Joanne suggested they step away from the center of the main room

and towards the fireplace. She did not want to be too far away from the children on the off chance any one of them called out to Hope.

"It is quite sad. The boy has not been himself since Elaine passed, but who could blame him? She was basically all he lived for." Joanne paused and briefly turned to face Hope, "But make no mistake, he loves Morgan and Alice to death."

Hope smirked; from recent happenings, she highly questioned if he truly did love them.

"Sure, does not seem that way to me."

"Oh, Hope, you should not have to judge a man's character based on his disposition for few days; you may have just caught him at the wrong time. You remember your first meeting with Eric, don't you?"

She remembered it as though it were yesterday, "Yes, I do. Sorry, I came off that way."

"It's fine. After Elaine passed, it was hard on him, but he would not let anyone in. You know, he practically buried himself in work to ease the pain, and now even that is being threatened."

"What? He lost his job?" Hope asked in surprise. She wondered how he had been coping with the pain of loss, how he intended to cope, going forward. A lot of questions came running through Hope's mind, but it was at that moment she realized that she probably was being too hard and judgmental of Eric. Granted, their first meeting was not exactly an ideal one, but where had her compassion, her humanity, vanished to? If anyone could understand the stinging pain that accompanied the loss of a loved one, she would be the one.

Losing her father was the worst thing that happened to her in all of her life. Apart from the fact that Hope and Rosemary were immediately thrown into turmoil, she missed the times they spent together, but all of those had become just memories. He was gone, and like Eric, she poured her life into cooking because it was her own way of coping with his loss - doing the very thing he was passionate about.

It was then she realized that she had not truly forgiven him. Circumstances had it that he was now her boss, and it did not make him less of a human being, even if he could be mean most times.

Joanne's answer to her question forcefully pulled Hope out of her thoughts, "Not exactly, but a friend of mine who works at the bank said he has been suspended for an allegation of misconduct... uuhhhh...a client's file missing or something. I really do not know much about all those things, but..."

The sound of an object crashing on the floor made the two women jump and gasp. The loud impact came from the master's chamber. At the same time, Morgan emerged from the hallway rubbing his eyes with the back of his palms; he yawned twice and walked lazily

towards Joanne and Hope. Hope stared wide-eyed at Joanne, wondering the next course of action; they both spoke almost at once.

"I'll take Morgan for a walk in the garden."

"I'll check to see if everything is okay upstairs."

With that, Joanne immediately took quick steps up the stairs.

Morgan stared at Hope in confusion, "But you said when I wake up, we were going to play t...." Hope knelt beside him; she knew that Morgan was too smart to be given a flimsy excuse despite his age.

"Yes, but how about we play in the garden instead? Grandmother and Father are having a little chat, and we want to give them a little bit of space, okay?"

He responded, "Okay," in a low dreamy voice, and both went hand in hand outside towards the garden.

At this point, Eric did not care about respecting elders; he stormed out of the room and, in his rage, almost knocked Joanne down.

Dianne called out to him,

"Don't you dare walk out on me!" But her orders fell on deaf ears.

Eric banged the large entrance door as he charged out of the house. He went deep in thought; what exactly was Mother trying to do bringing up Elaine? She knows how much that hurts yet somehow relishes in my pain. And I do love my children, for heaven's sake! Why is that even an issue for deliberation? As he angrily stomped towards the car, Eric's left eye caught Hope's figure. She was walking hand in hand with Morgan, presumably towards the garden. He wondered if Morgan heard any word of the argument that just ensued. He presumed not. The garden was Elaine's favorite place. She would sit in the courtyard, admiring the flowers and gazing at the stars when they came out. He hadn't stepped foot there since after the funeral. Eric felt a stab in his chest as the realization hit.

"I'm sorry, E. I love you," he muttered slowly.

Hope felt a pair of eyes leering on her and inquisitively turned around when she met Eric. She was not close enough to read the look on his face, but something told her he needed help badly. Help she assumed she could give. In what way could she possibly help Eric? There was only one way to find out, but even that way sounded like an impossibility. He was her boss, and she was going to respect that space.

Eric suddenly realized he was staring too long towards the garden, and at Hope, he quickly collected himself, climbed into the car, and drove off. He needed someplace to cool off and think, and his house was the least of options. Hope watched Eric drive off and silently prayed for an opportunity to speak with him and get to know how she could be of help without being fired. She could easily ask Joanne for

the details, but she did not want any misinterpretation of intentions.

"Miss Hope, do you think father still loves me?" a small voice asked.

Hope was taken aback by Morgan's question. She was serving him dinner and did not see that coming.

"Umm...why would you even think of that?"

"Well, it's just, he hurries out of the house every morning and doesn't even kiss us goodbye like he used to."

"Oh dear," Hope smoothed his hair. "Your father loves and adores both you and Alice more than anything or anyone in the world, I am sure of that. You see, your father just has some big problems on his mind right now. But rest assure he loves you more than all the stars in the sky."

His eyes looked up in fear, "Really? Will he fix it soon?"

"Yes, he will. Come on, you should finish up your soup before it gets cold. I'll bring Alice down for dinner too, okay?"

"Okay"

The evening breeze caressed Hope's face, bringing a handful of her hair to the right side of her temple. She tucked them behind her ears as she bathed in the moonlight. On most evenings, she sat in the courtyard, enjoying the garden. It was her favorite thing to do these days. It helped her relax from the tiredness of the day's activities and afforded her the opportunity to escape Dianne's drama and think. She enjoyed the solitude. Today, she thought of helping Eric but had not yet come up with the best possible way to approach him. Miriam stopped by the house earlier today, and Hope overheard her talking with Joanne about Eric's suspension from work. Somehow, she was able to get the full story and since then doubted the possibility she could be of help.

Apparently, a client applied for a loan from his bank and had defaulted on his payment. The bank would take over ownership of the collateral and have asked that Eric provide the deed to the property, but it was nowhere to be found. Since Eric and Mr. Alex, the loan applicant, had a history, the bank suspected foul play. According to bank policy, he had undergone suspension pending a review by the bank's board. How exactly am I supposed to be of help here? Hope wondered to herself.

Everything failed; Eric searched his files over and over and still couldn't find the deed. He was the most meticulous and organized person he knew, so there was no way he could not have filed Alex's documents accordingly. He had to clear his name by all means, and so far, he was not making any headway. He was tired from exhaustion

and craved solitude. After he parked his car in the driveway, Eric approached the giant entrance door and immediately decided against it. He swiftly turned left and took stealthy steps towards the garden instead. Work had been an escape from the pain of his loss, but that wasn't going well at the moment. He yearned for comfort. He anticipated that the garden would give him the solace he longed for.

Upon entering the garden, a sad smile played on his lips. Eric ran his hands through the lilies -that was Elaine's favorite section of the garden. He inhaled the scents, and memories flooded in.

"I miss you, E." He muttered.

Hope saw him walk into the garden and was confused about what to do. In all her days coming here, she'd never seen him, not once. She decided against running out but instead caught herself staring intently at him. The moon shone on his face, enunciating every curve and feature. She saw a heavy sorrow in the way he inhaled the scent of the lilies and wondered what was going on in his mind.

She thought back to that day at his office; her eyes did not only catch his alluring physique but also caught a property deed with Alex Williams' name. Seeing how organized the other files were in alphabetical order, she wondered why that document was not filed appropriately, but the woes of the moment took her mind off it. As the realization immediately hit Hope, she could not wait any longer to contemplate the rationality or not of her next course of action.

She immediately stood up from the bench and walked towards Eric; his back was facing her. "Good evening Sir, Mr. Burnett," she said.

Eric was startled at the silvery voice that pulled him out of melancholy reminiscences. He thought he was there alone. Who was this person who could not understand when a man needed time to himself? Eric turned his head around to see an excited Hope swiftly walking towards him. What on God's green earth was she doing? He pondered inwardly.

She came face to face with him and greeted again, "Good evening Mr. Burnett."

Eric was torn between being angry and pleased. Her face shone so brightly when she smiled; it was the most beautiful thing he had seen all day. So calming and satisfying. Somehow, his displeasure took the front seat, and he responded with a dead voice,

"Yes, how did you find me here? What do you want?"

"Sorry if I interrupted you. I have been here all evening; I come here to think most time. The scenery helps me."

The garden. Of all places, it just had to be the garden. Eric thought to himself.

“Okay, so...” he raised his eyebrows inquisitively.

“Oh, right. I came over because I think I have an idea where the Alex document is.”

Eric let out a laugh then held it in when he noticed she was firm in her stance. Something whispered to him to let her, but he could not hide his shock.

"Wait, how do you even...."

"I overheard Joanne earlier today." She was not going to let his smug attitude get to her. Hope really wanted to help, not for him, but more for the children.

"I know you are wondering how I know and why it even bothers me, but the truth is, I want Morgan and Alice to have their father back."

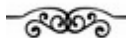
Her words stung.

“What do you mean, Miss Duncan?”

Hope repeated her discussion with Morgan to Eric, and she could see the hurt and pain in his eyes, but he masked it so quickly she doubted it was even there. This touched her deeply; she figured Eric was human after all.

"It's fine. I'll take care of my family business. So where did you say you saw the document again?" Hope beamed excited she really could be of help to Mr. Burnett; somehow, that made her feel content.

Chapter Three



It had been a month since Eric was cleared and had resumed working at the bank. Rosemary had recovered significantly and was scheduled to be discharged from the hospital in a few days. Eric finally started being conscious of spending time with the children. He kissed Morgan and Alice goodnight every night, played rock, paper and scissors with Morgan every time he got the chance; he even allowed Hope to cook her special chicken soup for the children. It seemed like everything was beginning to fall into place for Hope; her friendly disposition made her likable to everyone in the Burnett household, everyone except Mrs. Dianne Burnett. Hope's trial, the primary reason why Mrs. Dianne Burnett came to her son's house was long over, but she refused to go back to her home. She gave the excuse of wanting to be close to her grandchildren and her son, but Hope did not buy it.

Mrs. Dianne Burnett never took a liking to Hope ever since she stepped foot in the house. Somehow, her disapproval of Hope grew worse after discovering her role in getting her son's job back. Dianne taunted her at every chance she could get, and it was worse when there was no Eric or Joanne to come to her rescue. There was always something to blame Hope for no matter how hard she tried, a stain on Alice's dress, Morgan's behavior, or like today claimed that the chicken soup she served was salty. She never knew what it was with Mrs. Dianne Burnett. 'Why does she hate me so much?' She often wondered.

"Hope! Hope!" Dianne Burnett yelled at the top of her voice.

She was in the dining room, a bowl of chicken soup in front of her. Hope came running across from the living room and into the dining room.

"Yes, ma'am," she bowed to greet her, "I heard you call."

Dianne Burnett looked at her disdainfully from her head, down and back up.

"One would think you were deaf the number of times I had to call for you."

"Sorry ma'am, I was...."

Dianne grunted and cut in, "Is this what you served my grandchildren?"

She harshly tilted the bowl towards Hope so she could see its content. Hope saw the inside of the bowl; it was the chicken soup she had prepared a few hours ago for dinner. The children had eaten, and

so did Rachel, the chef who savored every spoonful. No one complained, and Hope wondered what it was Dianne Burnett tasted that made her react that way.

With confusion written all over her face, Hope responded quietly, unsure of what to expect,

"Yes, ma'am, it is. The children, even Rachel, ate the soup for dinner. Is something wrong with it?"

Dianne Burnett, with feigned disgust, said, "Who cares about Rachel? You mean to say you fed my grandchildren this pool of salt and dare call it soup. Who even authorized you to do the cooking around here? You are the nanny? Or don't you understand your role in this household?"

Panic registered with Hope, and she could barely let out a word, but she had to try to vindicate herself. "Mr. Burnett said I could only make chicken soup since the children love it, that is why. I'm sorry if you don't enjoy the taste. I can make another for you, reduce the salt and...."

Dianne angrily shushed her before another word left her mouth, "You don't get to talk back to me..." Dianne suddenly went into a fit; she began yelling and hurling insults at Hope. It was the first time anyone ridiculed her special recipe, but the insults and name-calling were unnecessary. To think that Dianne Burnett included her parents in it was the last straw. Under normal circumstances, she would pack her bags and quit because no one insulted her parents, especially not her late father; but she remembered the deal she made with Eric. The contract she signed that evening in his office stopped her from making any rash decision; it stopped her from leaving. She was indebted to Eric, probably for life, and quitting was not an option. Hope wished the ground would open up and swallow her at that moment. Hope heard the door open, firm footsteps approaching the dining room, and a husky voice speaking, but the tears that poured down her face blurred her vision.

The voice called her name, "Hope, Hope."

It was Eric; he was home.

He had mentioned earlier he was going to be working late. She hastily wiped her eyes with the hem of her dress and look towards where he was standing,

"Good evening, Sir, welcome home. I'll serve you dinner right away".

Hope was sniffing, and he noticed. "Good evening, what is the problem here? My mother said the soup was salty."

Hope stood still; no ounce of strength was left to justify herself. He'd probably crucify her, too, so she was just going to allow herself to be dragged to the slaughter. She kept mute.

Dianne became furious,

"Young lady, you heard the question, didn't you?"

Eric wondered what really was going on. In all his months of eating the chicken soup, it was always perfect. He loved it, and so did everyone in the house. He was glad when Rachel asked for his permission to let Hope prepare it; that meant that they did not have to go all the way to Barter's Pot to get it. He had a very long day at work and fantasized about eating soup all day, so this development was troubling because his stomach was already grumbling.

Eric didn't know why but seeing those tears on Hope's face grieved him. He really just wants to hug her and comfort her but questioned if that was a proper feeling at that moment. He asked her a question, but she was not responding; his mother made things worse, so he decided to intervene.

"You know what, just bring my meal to the table. I'll see for myself."

Eric pulled the chair out, dropped his work bag, and sat down, resting his elbows on the table.

"Son, you really want to eat that poison?"

Eric wasn't having any of it again, "Mother, please, I'll just see for myself, okay?"

Hope carefully served the meal, and as Eric ate, he could not find anything wrong, "But Mother, it is perfect."

Dianne Burnett hissed and rose up from the chair, "Of course, you'd take her side."

"Oh, Mother..."

"Goodnight, son."

Eric shrugged and continued eating; then, he thanked Hope and dismissed her. As she walked out of the dining room, she turned around and gave him a thankful grin. She was grateful for his intervention and just expected him to nod, but to her greatest surprise, he smiled at her.

"You are welcome," he said.

Hope's heart almost jumped out of its position; heat rushed to her cheeks, thankful the darkness hid her reaction.

The preparations for the children's school musical day had Hope busy all week. She barely spent time with her mother since she was discharged; she missed her tremendously. Morgan took piano lessons every day at home to perfect his rendition of 'Mary Had A Little Lamb.' Hope did not grow up on the piano but being with Morgan each day left her wanting to explore the passion she once had as a child. Seeing the children jump up in excitement at the roles they had to play in the musical made her nostalgic. It was 7 pm, and Hope had

just put Alice to sleep; she started walking towards Morgan's room to tuck him in when she remembered he was with his father. She rerouted to the living room and sat at the piano to pass the time, running her hands on the keys, careful not to make any sound with it. At that moment, Hope remembered all the dreams she had growing up; being a Nanny was not one of them, but life happened, and she counted herself lucky to take care of two of the most amazing children on the planet. Instead of regrets, gratitude flooded her heart.

Hope was so lost in her thoughts; she did not hear Eric come into the living room. He sat on the sofa opposite the piano, tilted his head, and watched with interest as she swung her head gently from side to side, moving to the rhythm in her head. Her long brown curly hair moved with ease, and he thought back to the very first time he saw her. Months of being in the same space had revealed her true character; she was loving, compassionate, caring. But other than that, she was the very definition of beauty. Her hand seemed to be hovering on the keys, but it produced no sound. Eric wondered if she could play, but he suspected she could not. Well, there was only one way to find out. He got up from the sofa and walked to where she was seated.

"Are you just being modest, or you really cannot play?"

Hope was startled at the voice. She stood holding her chest and gasped for breath.

"I didn't mean to scare you; I was just curious," Eric said as he sat on the stool.

Hope wondered how long he had been there. "I'm sorry, I was waiting to get Morgan to his room."

"It's okay. He'll sleep in my bed. Now would you mind answering the question?" He stated, his eyes filled a softness she'd never encountered before.

"You know what? Sit and tell me. Here." Eric patted the space next to him.

Hope hesitated and glanced towards the staircase; what if Mrs. Burnett came down and saw her. It was as though Eric heard her thoughts because he responded, "Mother is asleep, and it's not a request, so sit. And I need an answer; I really want to know."

Hope sat carefully and still debated the scene playing out, but she decided to ease a little and try having this conversation.

"No, but I've always wanted to play; I just never got the chance to."

Eric nodded, "Okay, you're in luck because the best pianist in the whole of Columbus will teach you how to."

Hope relaxed and giggled. "And who might that be?"

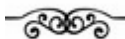
Eric smiled, "Mr. Eric Burnett, of course."

They both laughed, and unexpectedly he took her hands and placed her finger on the keys. The feel of his hands on her skin made

her shudder, but she quickly stilled herself. His hands were strong but not as rough as she had imagined them to be. The carefulness at which he guided her fingers almost made her melt under his touch. Her mind went places it probably shouldn't have; she quickly had to remind herself that Eric was her boss and nothing else.

On the other hand, Eric could not deny that his touch impacted Hope; he saw it in her eyes, in the way she smiled and looked at him. He remembered the way he felt when she smiled at him in the garden; he felt that way now. He always wanted to feel that way going forward, but he worried if such a decision was right or wrong.

Chapter Four



Dianne Burnett had officially become a thorn in Hope's flesh, but Hope made a commitment to serve the Burnett household with all grace and humility there was. She was going to stay with her mother for the weekend, and she looked forward to it all week. The weekly visits were not enough to exhaust all they had to tell each other, so she could not wait to finally get home. Besides, she missed her friends on the other side of town. No doubt, Hope warmed up to the Burnett Household, but some feelings, some people could not be easily replaced.

Speaking of feelings, she was confused about Eric's demeanor. The night together at the piano left her yearning for more. Surprisingly, she opened up to him about her childhood, the loss of her father, her interests, and her fears. She expected reciprocation from his end, but the only thing of great importance he spoke of was his sister, Alma. She was away in London but planned on coming back stateside during Christmas. Hope wished he would talk more about Elaine, but whenever the discussion went around that corner, he always had a way of veering it some other place. She never understood why it had to be so secreted. Hope searched her thoughts for answers; maybe he is not ready to talk about it, or is it that he does not yet trust me with his memories with her? She longed for that night again, but it felt like she was asking for the impossible. He was Eric that night but reverted to the old stoic Mr. Burnett the following morning. Maybe it meant nothing to him, she contemplated.

It hurt Eric to see Hope leave, even though it was just for a few days. He noticed the confusion in her eyes the morning after their time together at the piano. Responding to her greetings coldly as he did on other days, the smile on her face vanished as quickly as it appeared, but he decided that was the best act to put up. His feelings were playing tricks on him—one day, he would miss Elaine so severely he literally sniffed her clothes to make him sleep. On other days, he could barely think of anything or anyone else except Hope.

Eric watched from the doorstep as the children bid Hope farewell. Miriam was trying to peel Alice from Hope as she kept holding on to her. After several unsuccessful attempts, Hope scooped Alice into her arms, whispered something into her ear, and the little girl decided to go with Miriam. Miriam would be staying a while to fill in for Hope. She missed the children, so it was an excellent opportunity for her to

reconnect.

As Hope climbed into the car, she turned around to glance at Eric briefly. Her expression betrayed no emotions as she looked at him.

"Goodbye, Sir."

Eric felt shattered by the words. He knew she was returning soon, but those words were heavier than they seemed. He felt as though he had lost her, and he could not explain how. Eric opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out, and at that moment, Charles started the car and drove away. Sadness washed all over him like a bucket of cold water.

Just as the farewell team comprising Eric, Joanne, Miriam, Rachel, Morgan, and Alice were about to file into the house, the noise of a fast-approaching vehicle made them halt and turn around.

"Yaaaaay!! Miss Hope changed her mind." Morgan said, jumping in excitement.

Everyone stared in the direction of the oncoming vehicle waiting for an answer to the one question on everyone's mind.

"Joanne, do you think she forgot something?" It was Miriam asking, her gaze not leaving the direction of the vehicle.

Joanne turned to Eric, "Do you happen to be expecting someone?"

He shifted, "No, none that I am aware of."

The car came to a halt at the front of the house, and everyone waited patiently to see who the mysterious visitor was. A tall, slender woman in her early thirties alighted from the car; she was wearing a straight purple gown with silver high heels. She took off her glasses, looked around in admiration, and smiled.

"Oh no, not Anna," Joanne muttered.

She immediately seethed, motioned for Miriam to get the children inside, and followed after. Joanne almost collided with Dianne Burnett as she emerged from the house and elegantly strode towards the car.

"Oh my dear Anna, I was wondering when you'd make it here." Dianne Burnett greeted Anna with a warm embrace.

Eric was stunned at Anna's beauty; she had become even more beautiful since he last saw her at his wedding eight years ago. He was even more shocked that he was not privy to her invitation to his home. Eric hated surprises, especially impromptu visits like these. He suddenly realized it was impolite for the host to just stand and stare, so he approached both women.

"You didn't say you were coming, Ann. A call would have been appropriate, you know."

Dianne cut in before Anna had a chance to say anything, "Come on, son, that's no way to say hello to an old friend you haven't seen in years."

"Sincere apologies Anna, I am just surprised. It's been such a long

time. Of course, you are welcome to my home."

"It's fine. Come here, Ricky. I've missed you so much." Anna went in for an unanticipated hug; Eric gave in but pulled away almost immediately.

"Well, if you must know, Mrs. B invited me to stop by and stay for a while when she heard I had just come in from New York City, you know for old times' sake."

Eric cast a questioning glance at his mother as she quickly added.

"Yes, and to help plan for my 60th birthday party too, surprise, surprise."

"Mother, what? When were you going to tell me? I had no idea you were planning a party." he asked with a bewildered look.

Dianne Burnett smiled briefly at Eric then diverted her gaze to Anna.

"Come on, let's get you settled," then she turned towards Eric, "We'll talk about this after dinner, okay? Be a gentleman and grab Anna's bags."

Anna Maxwell was a big part of Eric's childhood. Both their parents were friends and belonged to the same social circle, so spending time together became a daily activity. They grew to become best of friends and were inseparable most of their teenage years. She knew all his young and embarrassing moments and vice versa. The friendship was lovely, they were known as best friends all over Downtown Columbus, but they were more than friends. Eric loved Anna; she knew that. She loved him too, but on the night Eric planned to ask her out, she broke the news to him that she was leaving to attend New York University. They both planned to attend Miami University in southwest Ohio, but Mr. Maxwell had other plans for his dear daughter. Eric suggested they try a long-distance relationship, but Anna wouldn't have it; she wanted to remain friends. Although they attempted to communicate frequently, neither one of them could keep up at some point. Soon after college, Anna decided she would stay in New York to pursue her dreams. Upon visiting home one summer, she was told of Eric's wedding to Elaine. She flew in a rage, but Eric pleaded with her to stay for his wedding for old times' sake. She obliged, and that was the last he ever saw of her, not until this afternoon.

Eric sat in the courtyard and stared into the garden; memories from the past flooded his remembrance and would not stop. He recalled the words he told Anna a few years back.

"I'll wait for you, Ann, I promise."

These thoughts were distorted, and for a moment, he wished he had someone to speak with. After Elaine's death, he withdrew from society, and in the past months, the only thing that seemed to set a

spark within him was a certain smile he'd gotten used to; it was Hope Duncan's smile.

Usually, Eric anticipated the weekdays as he took refuge in his office. He longed for the weekday on this particular weekend, but this time, for a totally different reason. Eric quickly turned as he heard footsteps approaching him, and the person came into the light.

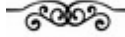
It was Anna.

"Hey, you seem distraught. Everything okay?"

He turned to her and nodded; "Yeah, just tired from work. How about you? So far, you've enjoyed your stay, right?"

As they sank deeper into the conversation, Eric realized how much he missed Anna. Following her departure from Columbus, those times were the toughest for him; he often wondered how he survived. Being with her now brought back all the memories he kept locked away for years. He smiled content in knowing that his friend had returned.

Chapter Five



"Mother, do you think I am silly for saying I enjoy his company when he is not coarse?"

Rosemary chuckled, "No, you are not being silly, you are just honest, that's all, but he is still your boss remember?"

Hope sighed and looked away from her mother, "I know, Mother, I just enjoy his company, that's all."

Rosemary gave her daughter a knowing smile, "Yes, you say that now but you still have to be careful around him. It is unwise to mix business with pleasure, my dear."

"Mother, please do not tell me you still hold a grudge against Mr. Burnett."

Hope looked at Rosemary inquisitively, but she kept mute.

"Mother, do you?"

"Of course, I do," she responded in a matter-of-fact tone. "I simply do not understand why you are not taking this as seriously as I am."

Here, we go with this speech again, Hope thought.

All weekend her mother had complained bitterly of how her deal with Eric was synonymous with mortgaging her life to the man. Despite all the good things she told her mother about Eric (not so many, but they still counted), she briefly appreciated him. But always reverted to the fact that her life belonged to him for the time being. How long? She still wasn't quite sure.

Hope rose up from her seated position, "Mother, please can we talk about this later? I need to pack up for the journey tomorrow morning."

Hope kissed her mother's right cheek and quickly exited before she had the chance to say anything else.

The weekend went by awfully fast; Hope barely noticed. She was having a good time. It was worth it because she had no idea when she would be given permission to stay as long as she did again.

She had extended her stay by three days but had to report back to the Burnett house by Wednesday morning. She missed Morgan and Alice so much she was aching to see their lovely faces again. Hope no doubt was happy to escape the viciousness of Dianne Burnett, but she missed Joanne and all the other staff. They had become family to her. All these persons she talked about, yet there remained one high-standing member of the household she was yet to acknowledge her feelings towards. The plaguing questions kept rolling in her mind, Do I really miss Eric? Do I yearn to see him again? To spend more time

with him?

With Eric, it was back and forth. One moment, they were sitting at the piano talking, laughing in excitement, and exchanging riddles, then the next moment, the sound of her name repels him into an ill-formed stance of her existence. Hope understood and respected his position as her boss, but she genuinely wanted to be a friend and nothing more. He really seemed like he could use one. That very thought ran through her mind aimlessly.

Hope's resolve progressed as she alighted from the car and approached the Burnett house on that fateful Wednesday morning.

When Eric wasn't working or spending time with the children. He was catching up on old times with Anna. They both had somehow renewed the spark of friendship through lengthy conversations, much to the pleasure of Dianne Burnett.

On the other hand, ever since Hope returned home, she became sealed off from him. She intentionally avoided his gazes, always exited the garden when he came by, and totally stopped taking piano lessons. Eric wondered if he did something wrong but could not bring himself to ask her. He would not; he was Eric Burnett. Even still, he managed to ask her if everything was okay at home and if she was feeling okay. "Yes, sir. All is good, thank you," and excused herself quickly before he could fix his lips to ask any follow-up questions.

The preparations for his mother's 60th birthday dinner party were in full swing, and the house was swarming with decorators, caterers, butlers, grocery supplies, everyone you could think of. Eric felt like a stranger in his own home. He decided to step out for a while. As soon as he opened the front door, Anna came up behind him.

"Going somewhere?"

He turned around to face her, "Yeah, just going for a walk."

"Mind if I join you?"

Eric thought of declining Anna's request but immediately decided against it. He realized he could use the company of a friend, and Anna was the only one he knew at that moment.

He gave her a knowing smile and replied, "Sure, as long as you don't tease me like you usually do."

Anna laughed heartily, and they both walked hand in hand out of the house.

The dinner party was underway; most guests looked like they were having a good time, others were pretending to, while some were conversing and mingling, probably spreading gossip. It was typical of a party such as this, and Eric hated it. The cocktail hour had since passed, and with just one hour to go, Eric's misery would soon be put

to an end. He kept looking at his pocket watch intermittently with an impatient look. He held a plastered smile as required of the host; well, technically, he was not the host of the party but good luck explaining that. Dianne Burnett had insisted her grandchildren attended the party, so Hope was on duty throughout the night.

The day before, Hope had caught sight of Eric walking hand in hand with Anna. Her heart ached at the sight, but she quickly cautioned herself. She would not allow Eric to toy with her feelings, and that was final; it had to be. Her eyes were glued on Eric for most of the night, his black tuxedo fitted his frame perfectly, and his green eyes added color. Hope was disgusted that she was smitten by his appearance.

Earlier that week, she saw how distraught Eric was when he'd noticed she was avoiding him. He stole quick glances at her while spending most of his time talking to Anna. Hope continuously bit her lip as jealousy surged through her. She, too, was watching the clock. She was itching to leave, but she did not dare shepherd the children out until Dianne said so, or the lady would launch into one of her never-ending tirades and would subsequently say that Hope ruined her party.

She sighed and leaned back into the chair again.

Morgan and Alice sat at the same table with her, and in between bites of cake, Morgan continued fiddling with the buttons on his tux. An hour to their extended bedtime—dear old grandma insisted—and she'd take him out of here. Alice sat quietly, eyes roaming the entire hall, whether seeking familiar faces or watching the unfamiliar ones; her eyes were in constant motion.

Hope decided that sitting around letting how she felt riot around inside her with no outlet was not going to work. She glanced to the spot where Eric once stood, and he wasn't there. She let her gaze flow over the room and caught sight of him striding out of the door that led to the garden. The black tuxedo on his ravishing frame was unmistakable.

'Am I ready to do this?' Hope mused.

She hesitated for a second, but her mind was already made up. She looked at the children and spoke urgently above the commotion of the party.

"Morgan, Alice dear. I have to go see your father now. I'll be back shortly. Be good, children, and stay in your seats, alright. Have more cake if you'd like."

She gathered her skirt and stood to her feet, heading in the direction of Eric. Unperturbed by if Dianne decided to throw a fit about leaving the kids, she had to speak to Eric. Her skirt rustled as she walked briskly. She wanted to ensure she caught Eric before she

lost her nerve. If she tried to slow, she might get cold feet and turn back. She reached the garden, close to the path, when she heard Anna's voice spilling words out rapidly.

"Eric, I know it's been a long time, and it's hard for you, but I'm willing to move in and give us a chance again. A chance I threw away a long time ago. But I'm here now."

Hope's heart thumped so hard she was sure it could be heard for miles, but her feet didn't stop moving. She couldn't place where the voice came from, but she was drawn towards the lilies. Then she heard Eric's voice but couldn't make out what he was saying. Her feet sped up. She haphazardly stumbled out of the lilies. Anna's arms were in Eric's, as the moonlight gracefully illuminated their silhouettes. They were inches away from each other, commemorating a wistful love they once shared.

"For what we had, I'm wil...." Eric trailed off as Hope abruptly appeared. "Hope! What are you doing here?" Eric found his voice again.

Anna's eyes steeled as she cast a cold scrutinizing squint on Hope, 'How dare she interrupt us?' She screamed internally.

The sight before Hope quenched whatever courage she gathered previously. Her knees suddenly became wobbly, her eyes glistened with tears, and at that moment, only one word made sense to her, "run." Hope immediately gathered her skirt and fled the garden.

Eric disentangled from Anna when Hope appeared; now, a distraught look shadowed his face as he realized the implications of what was happening.

He would have to make a choice.

He walked towards the direction Hope fled; he briefly turned to look at the seething Anna.

The silence was deafening.

He contemplated intensely if he should begin a life he once yearned for with his childhood sweetheart or commence a love with a beautiful stranger?

Eric was in a terrible fix with no way out in sight, but he knew it that moment the decision he would have to make would have grave consequences for all parties involved.

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